

Leadership & Influence in a Complex World

Learning portfolio: stage 2

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Word count (excluding 500 word summaries): 4160

Date submitted: 09 November 2011

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Balancing simplicity and complexity	2
1.2 Accepting complexity.....	2
1.2 Perceptions of complexity	3
1.3 Simplifying ineffectively	4
1.4 Effective simplicity	4
3. What came first, the morals or the visions?	5
3.1 Recognising the value of morals	5
3.2 Case Study – Switched On Schools	6
4. Creating the right spaces.....	7
4.1 The overall structure of the course.....	7
4.2 Action learning cycle.....	8
4.3 Gender equality	8
4.4 Mentoring	8
4.5 Indigenous perspectives	8
4.6 Voyage for the Future.....	8
4.7 Education and science	8
4.8 Group work - sharing and reflecting	9
5. Attempting a definition – what I will take from the course	10
5.1 Things remain unclear.....	10
5.2 The beauty of un-clarity.....	10
6. Reflections on the group blogs.....	11
6.1 Individual and group reflection.....	11
6.2 The simplistic model of leadership	11
6.3 How the group blog functioned as a learning experience.	12
7. Reflections on the individual speeches	13
7.1 From simple to complex perspectives	13
7.2 The challenge–bringing together theory and practice.....	13
References	14

1. Introduction

Writing the final piece of assessment for Leadership and Influence in a Complex World has been a difficult and engaging task. To take the experiences that have challenged, motivated and confused me each week and condense them in to a few thousand words has been no easy task. The reflections that follow touch on the range of thoughts I have had about leadership and influence and also the much broader thoughts I have had about complexity and culture.

I approached this learning portfolio with a very open plan and have allowed the experience of writing it to structure and guide my thoughts. In the pages that follow I will explore:

- the nature of experiencing, understanding and expressing complexity
- the importance of morals and values to leadership
- the spaces which leaders and influencers can create for others
- defining leadership and influence
- the group and individual presentations.

Writing the learning portfolio has helped me bring clarity to some of my thoughts about the context of the course and has helped me hone many questions and areas of interest.

2. Balancing simplicity and complexity

To my knowledge I was the only first year student to take Leadership and Influence this semester, which was a somewhat daunting thought as I entered the first tutorial session back in July. It was daunting not because I was going to be learning with a group of older students, but because I was concerned that my understanding of complexity would be too...simple. In my first semester of university I had developed some understanding of complexity through the course Geography of Sustainability (ENVS1001) which dealt with the interrelated nature of social, economic and ecological problems. However, I felt it was only the tip of the iceberg. Entering the leadership course, I was intrigued to see whether I would be at a disadvantage due to my limited knowledge of what complexity is, how it is studied and how it is understood.

I came to appreciate that a year or two of additional university courses could help my understanding of these areas, and also held in mind Richard Baker's words that the study of the complexity is 'part of a lifelong learning process' (week 1). Throughout the course there have been many lectures, panels, workshops and group discussions that have contributed to my understanding of complexity. At times it has led me to thoughts that stretch far beyond the realm of leadership and influence, but in most cases I have found ways to draw these musings back to the purposes of the course.

Although I was not disadvantaged by my lack of an academic understanding of complexity, I did struggle throughout the course to express my ideas about complexity and how it related to leadership and influence. Whether it was in writing or the spoken word, expressing new thoughts and concepts was challenging. I discussed this at great length with my group and together we realised that we were all experiencing this challenge. We felt that much of this difficulty stemmed from limitations of our own lived cultural knowledge, particularly the constraints around the language that we use. (See group blog for more, <http://g5groupfive.wordpress.com/culture-and-language/the-language-we-use/>). Since making this realisation I have searched for ways to talk, write and think about complexity in ways that are simple and relatable, but also retain the original concept or idea. This was one of the greatest challenges for me in the course, but also the one I learnt the most from.

1.2 Accepting complexity

It was in week 5 that I began to accept complexity as something which could not be struggled against, it could not be moulded to a particular way of understanding or process. Mick Cadew-Hall's remarks helped me realise that complexity had to be lived, discussed and slowly understood. He described how he worked through difficult and complex situations at work by first absorbing all the information presented, and then wallowing in its complexity until tangible and clear ideas began to form. Despite his professional position in the business world, he did not systemise or organise his thoughts to simply break down the complexity, he had to ponder and experience the many constituent parts to reach a point of understanding. This idea expresses the struggle between the logical and structural processes that are often put in place to deal with complex problems, and the emotional and irrational way humans often make decisions. This point was a theme of the Sustainable Development (ENVS1008) course I also took this semester. In areas such as policy development, linear processes are often applied to complex issues which are shaped by multiple stakeholders. This proves ineffective as it does not allow for the myriad of ways that individuals and

groups will attempt to influence the process and the multitude of perspectives that need to be considered before a decision can be made.

1.2 Perceptions of complexity

From my growing acceptance of complexity I have been interested to gain a greater appreciation of the ways that complexity can be perceived, experienced and understood. I think these are valuable skills for academic pursuit and more broadly for leadership and influence. The other courses I have taken this semester have provided interesting perspectives on how to study complexity and the different ways in which it can be perceived.

The focus of the Sustainable Development course began with the broad and complex problems that define the current social, ecological and economic problems the world is facing. These factors were presented in the context of the past, present and future. The same narrative process was then used to focus on how individuals contribute to these problems.

Leadership and Influence has taken a different approach, where the focus is on how each of us as individuals can develop a greater understanding of leadership and influence. The focus of individual reflection and development has gradually broadened to look at the role individuals and groups can have in shaping broader social and cultural values and purposes.

In the Blue Planet (EMSC1006) we focussed on the complex geological, atmospheric, hydrological and biological processes that shape the planet. I found it a refreshing course as it provided explanations and clarity on how these complex phenomena occur. In this case the complexity could be broken down, understood and resynthesised to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the earth works. It was then interesting to observe in the final weeks of the course, the lecturers shift the focus to the impact of humans on earth systems. As soon as social and human factors were introduced to the theories and understandings of these systems, clarity was lost and the complexity increased. This notion was expanded upon by Ian Chubb's idea (week 8) that humans often do not relate to objective facts and are instead led by their emotive responses and connections to things. And so humans seem to create a unique form of complexity.

The importance of understanding phenomena at different scales and from varied perspectives was carried through Dr Maria Maley's (Week 10) discussion of how individuals, groups and institutions shape the nature of politics in Australia and elsewhere. This was one example of how the factors which interact to create complexity could be simplified and more easily presented and comprehended. Developing the ability to take complex situations and find simpler ways to understand and express is something that this course has inspired me to study and explore further. Already I have had some thoughts on how complexity can be dealt with ineffectively and effectively.

1.3 Simplifying ineffectively

One aspect of the course that frustrated me was the many presenters who reduced their complex thoughts on leadership and influence to a few dot points. Dot points can be an effective way to structure a piece of writing or speech, but my frustration stemmed from their use as a way of encapsulating whole concepts or theories. Michael Platow (week 4) was one person I felt used dot points to poor effect in his presentation. At the start of the lecture he debunked and dismissed the simplistic, 'great man', skills and traits based models of leadership. He then presented group psychology and dynamics as an alternative perspective from which to view leadership. However, he then went on to summarise his theory and explain how it could be implemented with the use of three dot points or qualities of leadership:

- Reflect (find out about the group)
- Represent (stand for, and stand up for the group)
- Realise (turn the groups idea in to reality)

I felt this way of identifying what an individual could do to become a better leader in a group context, to be limited as it brought us back to a traits based approach. Effectively he was indicating the three traits that a leader needed to be an effective leader.

1.4 Effective simplicity

A book and article I recently read gave me some guidance on how to express complexity in simple and understandable ways. In *The Story Factor*, Annette Simmons (2006) describes the importance of stories and personal narrative as a way of expressing complex ideas,

“In order to learn about influence we must leave the comfort of models, linear sequences, and step-by-step recipes” (p.xviii).

Stories are a way to present logical or complex information in a way that appeals to the emotions and irrational aspects of human thought processes. Stepping away from rational ways of explaining complex ideas was clearly demonstrated in an additional reading I did for the Indigenous week. I was interested to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing and came across *Tjukurrpa, Painting Up, and Building Thought* (San Roque 2006). Although the paper was written for an academic conference, the author effectively wove stories and personal experiences throughout a psychoanalytical and sociological exploration of Indigenous culture. The stories expressed more about the complexity of this culture than I had read in any more traditionally structured paper. These are ideas that build on the week three reading by Kouzes and Posners, *The Leadership Challenge* (2002),

“Research has shown that information is more quickly and accurately remembered when it is first presented in the form of an example or story” (p.6).

I was interested to see this theme of creative expression emerge as an important reflection for several people in their final talks of the course. Although art and creativity was not directly addressed in the course it seemed for many an important way to deal with complexity. These new ways of understanding complexity will serve me well in my future endeavours to both learn about and communicate complex issues.

3. What came first, the morals or the visions?

Of all the themes that have run through the course, the importance of vision has been touched on most often by both the presenters and the readings. Ron Brent (Week 1) presented vision as integral to anything a leader does forth without it the purpose of leadership stands lifeless. In Week 9 Xuemei Bai expanded on this idea by saying that in regard to environmental leadership it “doesn’t matter what the underlying values are, as long as the outcome is beneficial”.

3.1 Recognising the value of morals

Throughout the course I was often left wondering whether people can lead and have influence without a vision. The question first came to me whilst writing my speech for the week 3 talk about Michael Nekvapil, a teacher at Orana Steiner School. He is someone I have considered a significant influence on my life, a sentiment I know is shared by many others students at the school. Michael helps his students find an interest in their learning and has inspired them in their future plans which I see is a characteristic of a great influencer. Yet it does not seem that he acts in this way because he has a structured vision for the future, rather Michael knows that this is the way he must work with his students; his actions are informed by his morals. In a very different context Angus Houston represented this kind of leadership in his response to the Children Overboard incident. When brought before a Parliamentary Committee on the matter he was direct and honest, perhaps unusual in this situation as his career was at risk. He said, “It doesn’t matter what you’re asked...you’ve got to tell truth” (Houston, 2011).

Houston would later be applauded for his candid leadership on the issue, but this was not leadership defined by a vision but rather the ethical duty he perceived to tell the truth.

I now feel that it is possible for a leader or influencer to create significant change without a defined vision in mind. That it is possible for someone to lead and be guided by their morals or sense of ethics. This perspective relates to the Indigenous conception of leadership. In *Stories from the circle* Julien *et al* explain that for Canadian aboriginals leadership and influence is the idea that “it all comes down to spirituality-it’s our bottom line” (p.120). In their culture the role of the leader is not defined by a strong vision, but rather by the role that person is understood to play in a particular community at a particular time.

In contrast to these ideas there have been some presenters such as Michael Platow and Xuemei Bai who isolated morals from leadership and influence. However I have found myself much more inclined to the ideas of people such as Ian Chubb (week 8) who said, “leaders must have a vision defined by their value set” and Anne-Marie Arabia who questioned why ethics had been removed from many areas of science. Personally I feel that the teaching or learning of leadership and influence stands lifeless if the morals and ethics which define how those lessons are put in to practice are disregarded. Ideally I think a leader or influencer should be judged not only on their vision but also the morals that underpin what it is they wish to achieve.

As a final point on the importance of values I was interested by another idea from the *Story Factor* (Simmons 2006). The idea that a leader cannot share a vision with others until a level of trust and understanding is developed. As Chris Nailor (week 5) said, trust is essential to the function of a team and is gained by developing shared understandings and interests within a group. I was interested to apply these ideas to a group project I have been involved with this year.

3.2 Case Study – Switched On Schools

Since the start of the year I have helped establish and co-ordinate the Switched On Schools Canberra (SOS) program. In reflection, I realised that I have learnt a lot about trust through the group work I have been involved with. SOS pairs 2 university students with a Canberra high school to help school students become passionate about environmental issues, develop their understanding of the issues and to initiate a practical project in their school or community. We have 20 mentors working with 10 schools. We have realised the value of taking the time to firstly develop trust with each individual, running interactive group meetings and regularly discussing what each person gains from being a part of the program, and what we do and don't value about it. The more we have been able to do this, the more effectively discussions on the direction and vision of SOS have run. As I now understand that trust and valuing each individual's contribution are major factors underpinning group dynamics, I will continue to be sure that these values remain important regardless of how busy or large SOS becomes.



The Switched On Schools team (photo by Maddy Bishop)

4. Creating the right spaces

Over the final weeks of the course I began to feel confused and unsure about all the course content I had been through and the many in-depth discussions our group was having. I found myself questioning whether there was anything tangible I would take from the course or whether I would just be left with a broad range of musings on the nature of complexity, morals and social dynamics. Our group came to refer to these thoughts as the 'post-modern soup'.



Slowly I was able to draw myself out from the 'soup' and to bring some clarity to my thoughts. This change was sparked by two interesting moments. The first was some insightful words from a friend, who had this reflection on the formal leadership roles she had been involved with,

'When I work with a group of people I always want to get to know each person and to celebrate their individuality. I find that once you know someone at a more personal level, then it is possible to give them the space to lead within the group and for them to own and develop our shared vision and purpose''

The second moment was reading an article by Leighton on our group blog. In *Why has group five worked so well?* (<http://g5groupfive.wordpress.com/a-synergistic-group/why-has-group-five-worked-together-so-well/>) Leighton identified three main reasons our team had functioned so well over the semester:

- an acceptance and appreciation of different views and beliefs
- an openness to share personal ideas and feelings with the group
- no one attempted to 'out-lead' the others.

These two moments led me to realise that I could think about leadership and influence as separate (but still related) phenomena. This allowed me to draw out greater meaning from what I was learning in the course. I came to the idea that leaders are defined by the role they hold and a group recognising that position, a person of influence is defined by the spaces they create for others to exercise their own ideas and vision within the context of a group. These are spaces for people to share ideas, to collectively form new understandings and to realise they have the ability to shape the vision and purpose of a group. These are spaces that can be created by a leader, if they have the humility to shift their power and give greater ownership to the people they work with.

How such 'spaces can be created' is something that I have seen as a theme running throughout the course. Many of the key things I have learnt, were realised by thinking about the course content in the context of creating spaces.

4.1 The overall structure of the course

It has been a space for individuals from many disciplines and with a wide range of perspectives to present their ideas, thoughts and vision. Rarely would business, gender, environmental, political, Indigenous and other perspectives all be given the same value in the one course.

4.2 Action learning cycle

I saw Geoff Mortimore's Action Learning Cycle as a way for an individual to create their own space in which to develop new understandings and gain inspiration. Going through the process of observation, analysis, adjustment and reflection is about creating that space.

4.3 Gender equality

The three presenters in week 6 explained that although women are considered equal in legal and most societal terms, there are still significant institutional and organisational barriers to true gender equality. Kim Rubenstein talked of the long term and systemic structures which precluded women from participating at an equal level in field such as academia. In the tutorial discussion that followed this point was picked up on. There was a strong sentiment that allowing women equal opportunity to interact with these institutions and organisations was a good first step, but to truly reach equality there was going to need to be a shift in the way men perceive their role within society. In effect, men needed to be involved in creating a new space that would allow equality.

4.4 Mentoring

Sarah Pearson (week 6) spoke about the importance of having mentors throughout life. Those people that can fuel someone's passion, help them find clarity in their thoughts and ideas and provide opportunities and insights. In my final speech I talked of Arron Wood, director of Kids Teaching Kids, someone I have considered a mentor for the past four years. I see Arron as someone that has created the 'space' for me to explore my interests and to develop new understandings of environmental issues and the role young people can play in solving them.

4.5 Indigenous perspectives

Week 7 caused a significant shift in the focus of our group discussions. The speakers created a space for us to begin exploring vastly different ideas of leadership and influence. They did this not by being prescriptive and direct in their messages about leadership and influence, but by sharing stories and reflections from their lives, by allowing us to attach our own meanings and significance to what they were saying

4.6 Voyage for the Future

Neil Hamilton's account of the journey of young people to the Arctic was a clear example of an experience that created a space in which many young people go step forward and cast a new purpose and vision for themselves. It was clear from the video he showed that this had been a compelling and inspiring space for the young people that took the voyage.

4.7 Education and science

Ian Chubb (week 8) spoke about taking people through the journey of science. To combat the growing distrust of science on issues such as climate change, Chubb saw the need to engage more people in the understanding and production of science. He wanted the space to be created where people could engage with the science at an intellectual level, not just through their emotive responses.

4.8 Group work - sharing and reflecting

Our group created an effective space for collective learning by taking the time to develop trust and shared understandings. We did this by each talking about the 'defining moments of our lives' and our hopes and concerns for the future. The time taken to build this trust proved highly valuable throughout the rest of the course and underpinned all that we learnt together.

Mick Cardew-Hall (week 5) spoke about how he worked as a mentor for highly talented people in a work place environment. From this perspective, he also saw that it was important to create the right environment or space for bright and creative people to work with in.

5. Attempting a definition – what I will take from the course

Throughout the course I knew that forming some final remarks on how I now perceive leadership and influence would be a challenge. The questions that form and the ambiguity that arises are both the great value and great challenge of a course that deals with multiple perspectives and focuses on individual, groups, society and culture. Just considering the different perspectives presented in one week can be confronting. In week 8 Ian Chubb claimed that leaders should never show fear, only to be followed by Anna-Marie Arabia's explanation of the benefits of showing vulnerability.

As I come to the end of writing this learning portfolio I am still 'wallowing in the complexity' of it all, as Mick Cardew-Hall would describe it. But there have been a few moments of clarity and key ideas I will take away from the course with me.

5.1 Things remain unclear

I do not feel capable of giving a definition or description of leadership and influence. I know it has much to do with contexts and how groups of people work together. The words leadership and influence often interchanged, though there are also differences. Leadership is more official, it is recognised by people, influence is more subtle it is the transfer of power and the creation of spaces; but, where the line is drawn I am not sure. Leadership and influence are much more than traits and abilities, something nearly every group and individual has touched on during the course. Though I was reminded of the importance of skills such as charisma as I listened to Don Henry, Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation and Senator Penny Wong speak after the passing of the Carbon Tax legislation on 8 November. Their two speeches gave me that 'tingle down the back of the neck' feeling, a powerful response for any leader or influencer to be able to induce.

5.2 The beauty of un-clarity

Just because I cannot give a final definition of how I now see leadership and influence, does not mean that I have not taken a lot from the course. I found comfort in this lack of clarity when thinking back to Chris Nailor, who spoke about going out in to the world with what knowledge you do have and using this as the way to find new learning opportunities and so expand your knowledge. This will be my focus leaving the course, finding those situations and opportunities where I can test out and embody the complexity of what it is to be a leader or influencer. A key focus for me will be the idea of creating spaces. Though it is not directly tangible I am sure it will sit at the back of my mind and lend itself to many situations I will find myself in over the coming years. Though I will be sure to not limit my perspective so that I can also experience situations where immediate and direct leadership or influence is required, such as in times of crises.

6. Reflections on the group blogs

I found the week 11 group presentations one of the more interesting sessions course. I was intrigued to see that there were some groups which had worked together well for the whole course and others that had 'imploded' as one presenter put it. There were some interesting examples of how what people say both as individuals and as groups differs at times from the actions they take. There were three main themes that arose around this idea:

- the importance of reflection both individually and as a whole
- the rejection of the simplistic model of leadership
- and more specifically how the group blog functioned as a learn experience.

6.1 Individual and group reflection

Some groups were able to effectively present a collective understanding, whilst still expressing the different perspectives of each individual. Group 10 for example spoke of the diversity of disciplinary views that made up their group and that despite their differences they were able to develop shared understandings because they all held an interest in community development. For the groups that worked well together, the time taken to share personal reflections with each other and for those ideas to be respected seemed integral to functioning of the group. I was fortunate enough to work in a group that took the time to reflect with each other and share our own 'stories'. I owe a great deal of what I learnt in the course to Sasha, Garry and Leighton.

There were other groups, such as Group 1 that had struggled to work together effectively, and in some cases not at all. The result was presentations that focussed predominantly on the speakers personal reflections and did not integrate the other views and opinions of the group. For me these groups seemed to have lacked that time spent reflecting on the things that interested and inspired each person.

6.2 The simplistic model of leadership

Common to the story of the all the groups was the rejection of the simplistic 'great man' view of leadership. Many groups referred to Michael Platow's psychology of group leadership and the Indigenous perspective of leadership as the turning point in their understanding . For many the focus shifted to the dynamics of groups and the importance of followers in determining what role a leader or influencer plays.

I was, however, interested by the groups which talked about this move away from a simplistic understanding of leadership and then went on to explain that there group had not worked effectively. This seemed to present a divide between the study and understanding of leadership and its implementation and realisation. If a group had adopted the idea that simplistic, 'great man', leadership is not effective and accepted that group dynamics were fundamental, why then would individual views and perspectives so divide and disrupt collective learning?

6.3 How the group blog functioned as a learning experience.

I was also interested to see how each group used the blog assignment as a learning tool. For some, such as group 7 it became a space not only for sharing resources and ideas but also holistic reflections on the purpose and role of leadership and influence. It appeared to me the end product of much broader discussions on the topics of the course; this way of learning reflected most closely what I experienced in my group work. Again there were other groups that took a much different approach. For several, the website seemed to be a space which just had to be filled with resources and individual ideas, and that doing this would present a collective learning. Some of the blogs that took this approach certainly developed a broad range of interesting resources and reflections, but still lacked some of the finer qualities of a true piece of collective learning.

7. Reflections on the individual speeches

The first thing I realised whilst listening to the week 13 speeches was the greater confidence all my peers were speaking with compared to the week 3 talks. I found that almost everyone not only spoke with greater clarity and confidence, but that the structure and flow of the speeches was much more effective.

There were many interesting links and also contrasts between the group presentations and the individual talks, there were two key themes:

- the change from simplistic to complex perspectives of leadership and influence
- the challenge of bringing together the theory and practice

7.1 From simple to complex perspectives

In some way all the speakers referred to a shift in their perspective of leadership from the simplistic model to one more complex. For some it was a small shift; from a 'great man' style perspective to one that encompassed the dynamics of groups and individuals. For others the change was much more significant; to consider the much broader social and cultural norms and dynamics which shape how leadership and influence is perceived and hence how it is employed in a particular context. I found that the latter people did not give explicit definitions, but rather alluded to the highly changeable and contextualised nature of the phenomena we term leadership and influence. The former group did provide more tangible definitions and spoke of personal goals.

It was beneficial for me to hear how people drew out these tangible and direct messages from the course. Before the speeches I had got to the point in my thinking where I felt it was wrong to try and draw out any specifics from what I have learnt in the course, as I felt it was all completely contextual and relative. I realised that it was ok to identify specific and tangible goals for myself and how I would develop my understanding and practice of leadership and influence. However, I did maintain the belief that it was not possible to draw out a general definition of what leadership and influence are.

7.2 The challenge—bringing together theory and practice

Several speeches touched on the difficulty of taking what is learnt in a class room and applying it in practice. This was a challenge Richard Baker identified in the first week of the course when he put it to the class that we would be testing whether 'leadership can be learnt in the class room'. The section above touched on the shift all the presenters had experienced in their view of leadership and influence, however this seemed to predominantly be at the conceptual level.

There were a few presenters that directly outlined what they would take from the course and how they would implement it in their role as a leader or influencer. I was unable to reach such a point of clarity and so will be interested to see what comes of everyone's efforts beyond this course.

Regardless of the new perspectives, goals or interests people take from the course, I get the sense that learning about leadership and influence is going to be life-long interests for most of us.

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